

THE MYSTERY OF LENT



FROM

“THE LITURGICAL YEAR”

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BY

DOM GUERANGER



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We may be sure that a season as sacred as Lent is rich in mysteries. The Church has made Lent a time of recollection and penance in preparation for the greatest of all feasts. Therefore, the Church would bring into it everything that could excite the faith of her children and encourage them to go through the arduous work of atonement for their sins. During Septuagesima, the number seventy reminded us of those seventy years of captivity in Babylon, after which God's chosen people, being purified from idolatry, were to return to Jerusalem and celebrate the Pasch. Now, the Church brings before us the number forty, a number, Saint Jerome observes, denoting punishment and affliction. [1]

Let us remember the forty days and forty nights of the deluge [2] sent by God in His anger when He repented that He had made man and destroyed the entire human race with the exception of one family. Consider how the Hebrew people, in punishment for their ingratitude, wandered forty years in the desert before they were permitted to enter the promised land. [3] Listen to God commanding Ezekiel to lie forty days on his right side, as a figure of the siege that was to bring destruction on Jerusalem.[4]

Two persons in the Old Testament represent the two manifestations of God: Moses, who typifies the Law; and Elias, who is the figure of the Prophets. Both are permitted to approach God: the first on Sinai [5] and the second on Horeb. [6] Yet both of them must prepare for the great favor by an expiatory fast of forty days.

With these mysterious facts before us, we can understand why the Son of God, having become Man for our salvation and wishing to subject Himself to the pain of fasting, chose the number of forty days. The institution of Lent is thus brought before us with everything that can impress the mind with its solemn character and with its power to appease God and purify our souls. Look beyond the little world that surrounds us and see how the entire Christian universe is, at this very time, offering forty days' penance as a sacrifice of propitiation to the offended Majesty of God. Let us hope that, as in the case of the Ninivites, He will mercifully accept this year's offering of our atonement and pardon us our sins.

The number of our days of Lent is a holy mystery. Let us now learn from the liturgy, in what light the Church views her children during these forty days. The Church considers her children an immense army, fighting day and night against spiritual enemies. We remember how, on Ash Wednesday, she calls Lent a Christian warfare. In order that we may have that newness of life that will make us worthy to sing once more our Alleluia, we must conquer our three enemies: the devil, the flesh, and the world. We are fellow combatants with our Jesus, for He, too, submits to the triple temptation suggested to Him in person by Satan. Therefore, we must wear our armor and watch unceasingly. While it is of the utmost importance that our hearts be spirited and brave, the Church gives us a

war-song of heaven's own making that can fire even cowards with hope of victory and confidence in God's help. That song is the Ninetieth Psalm. [7] The Church inserts the entire psalm into the Mass of the first Sunday of Lent and every day introduces several of its verses into the ferial Office.

There, the Church tells us to rely on the protection wherewith our heavenly Father covers us, as with a shield. [8] She tells us to hope under the shelter of His wings [9] and to have confidence in Him for He will deliver us from the snare of the hunter [10] who robbed us of the holy liberty of the children of God. She tells us to rely upon the succor of the holy angels, who are our brothers, to whom our Lord hath given charge that they keep us in all our ways [11] and who, when Jesus permitted Satan to tempt Him, were the adoring witnesses of His combat and approached Him after His victory, proffering to Him their service and homage. Let us well absorb these sentiments wherewith the Church would have us be inspired. During our six-week campaign, let us often repeat this admirable canticle that fully describes what the soldiers of Christ should be and feel in this season of great spiritual warfare.

However, the Church is not satisfied with only animating us to the contest with our enemies. She would also have our minds engrossed with thoughts of deepest import. Towards this end, she puts before us three great subjects, which she will gradually unfold to us between this and the great Easter solemnity. Let us be all attention to these soul-stirring and instructive lessons.

Firstly, there is the conspiracy of the Jews against our Redeemer. It will be brought before us in its whole history, from its first formation to its final consummation on Good Friday, when we shall behold the Son of God hanging on the wood of the cross. The infamous workings of the Synagogue will be brought before us so regularly, that we shall be able to follow the plot in all its details. We shall be inflamed with love for the august Victim, whose meekness, wisdom, and dignity bespeak a God. The divine drama that began in the cave of Bethlehem will close on Calvary. We may assist at it by meditating on the passages of the Gospel read to us by the Church during these days of Lent.

The second of the subjects offered to us for our instruction, requires that we should remember how the feast of Easter is to be the day of new birth for our catechumens, and how, in the early ages of the Church, Lent was the immediate and solemn preparation given to candidates for Baptism. The holy liturgy of the present season retains much of the instruction the Church used to give to the catechumens. As we listen to her magnificent lessons from both the Old Testament and the New Testament, whereby she completed their initiation, we ought to think with gratitude of how we were not required to wait years before being made children of God, but were mercifully admitted to Baptism even in our infancy. We shall be led to pray for those new catechumens, who, this very year, in far distant countries, are receiving instructions from their zealous

missioners and are looking forward, as did the postulants of the primitive Church, to that grand feast of our Savior's victory over death. Then, they are to be cleansed in the waters of Baptism and receive from the contact a new being—regeneration.

Thirdly, we must remember how, formerly, the public penitents (who had been separated on Ash Wednesday from the assembly of the faithful) were the object of the Church's maternal concern during the forty days of Lent and were to be admitted to reconciliation on Maundy Thursday, if their repentance merited this public forgiveness. We shall have the admirable course of instructions, which were originally designed for these penitents, and which the liturgy, faithful as it ever is to such traditions, retains for our sake. As we read these sublime passages of the Scripture, we shall naturally think upon our own sins and on what easy terms our sins were pardoned. If we had lived in other times, we might have been put through the ordeal of a public and severe penance. This will excite us to fervor for we shall remember that, whatever changes the indulgence of the Church may lead her to make in her discipline, the justice of our God is ever the same. We shall find in all this an additional motive to offer the sacrifice of a contrite heart to His Divine Majesty and we shall go through our penances with that cheerful eagerness, which the conviction of our deserving much harsher penance always brings with it.

To keep up the character of mournfulness and austerity that is so well suited to Lent, for many centuries, the Church admitted very few feasts into this portion of her year, inasmuch as there is always joy where there is even a spiritual feast. In the fourth century, the Council of Laodicea (in its fifty-first canon) forbade the keeping of a feast or commemoration of any saint during Lent, except on the Saturdays or Sundays. [12] The Greek Church rigidly maintained this point of Lenten discipline. It was not until many centuries after the Council of Laodicea that the Church made an exception for March 25, the feast of our Lady's Annunciation.

At least in principle, the Church of Rome maintained this same discipline, but she admitted the feast of the Annunciation at a very early period and, somewhat later, she also admitted the feast of Saint Mathias the Apostle on February 24. During the last few centuries, the Church has admitted several other feasts into that portion of her general calendar that coincides with Lent, but still observes a certain restriction, out of respect for the ancient practice. The reason why the Church of Rome is less severe on this point of excluding the saints' feasts during Lent is that the Christians of the west have never seen the celebration of a feast as incompatible with fasting. The Greeks, on the contrary, believe the two are irreconcilable and, as a consequence of this principle, never observe Saturday as a fasting day because they always keep it as a solemnity, though they make an exception and fast on Holy Saturday. For the same reason, they do not fast upon the Annunciation.

In or about the seventh century, this strange idea gave rise to a custom that is peculiar to the Greek Church. It is called the Mass of the Presanctified, that is to say, consecrated in a previous Sacrifice. On each Sunday of Lent, the priest consecrates six Hosts, one of which he receives in that Mass; but the remaining five are reserved for a simple Communion that is made on each of the five following days, without the holy Sacrifice being offered. The Latin Church practices this rite only once in the year, that is, on Good Friday, and this in commemoration of a sublime mystery, which we will explain in its proper place.

This custom of the Greek Church was evidently suggested by the forty-ninth canon of the Council of Laodicea, which forbids the offering of bread for the Sacrifice during Lent, except on the Saturdays and Sundays.[13] Some centuries later, the Greeks, concluded from this canon that the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice was incompatible with fasting. From the controversy they had with the legate Humbert [14] in the ninth century, we learn that the Mass of the Presanctified (which has no other authority to rest on save a canon of the famous Council in Trullo held in 692 [15]) was justified by the Greeks on this absurd plea: Communion of the Body and Blood of our Lord broke the Lenten fast.

The Greeks celebrate this rite in the evening after Vespers and the priest alone communicates, as is done now in the Roman liturgy on Good Friday. For many centuries, they have made an exception for the Annunciation. They interrupt the Lenten fast on this feast, they celebrate Mass, and the faithful are allowed to receive Holy Communion.

The canon of the Council of Laodicea was probably never received in the western Church. If the suspension of the Holy Sacrifice during Lent was ever practiced in Rome, it was only on the Thursdays. Even that custom was abandoned in the eighth century, as we learn from Anastasius the Librarian, who tells us that Pope Saint Gregory II, desiring to complete the Roman sacramentary, added Masses for the Thursdays of the first five weeks of Lent. [16] It is difficult to assign the reason of this interruption of the Mass on Thursdays in the Roman Church or the like custom observed by the Church of Milan on the Fridays of Lent. The explanations we have found by different authors are not satisfactory. As far as Milan is concerned, we are inclined to think that, not satisfied with the mere adoption of the Roman usage of not celebrating Mass on Good Friday, the Ambrosian Church extended the rite to all the Fridays of Lent.

After thus briefly alluding to these details, we must close our present chapter by a few words on the holy rites that are now observed during Lent in our western churches. We have explained several of these in our “septuagesima.” [17] They include suspension of the alleluia, the purple vestments, laying aside the deacon’s dalmatic and the subdeacon’s tunic, omission of the two joyful canticles (Gloria in Excelsis and Te Deum), substitution of the mournful Tract for the Alleluia-verse in the Mass, *Benedicamus Domino* instead of

Ita Missa est, the additional prayer said over the people after the Postcommunions on ferial days, and celebration of the Vesper Office before midday excepting on the Sundays. All these are familiar to our readers. We have now only to mention, in addition, the genuflections prescribed for the conclusion of all the Hours of the Divine Office on ferias and the rubric that bids the choir to kneel on those same days during the Canon of the Mass.

Other ceremonies observed in the Churches of the west were typical to the season of Lent but have fallen into general disuse for many centuries. We say general disuse, because they are still partially kept up in some places. Of these rites, the most imposing was that of putting up a large veil between the choir and the altar so that neither clergy nor people could look upon the holy mysteries celebrated within the sanctuary. This veil (called the Curtain, and, generally speaking, of a purple color) was a symbol of the penance to which the sinner ought to subject himself to merit the sight of that divine Majesty, before whose face he had committed so many outrages. It signified, moreover, the humiliations endured by our Redeemer, who was a stumbling block to the proud Synagogue. However, as a veil that is suddenly drawn aside, these humiliations were to give way, and be changed into the glories of the Resurrection. [18] Among other places where this rite is still observed, we may mention the metropolitan church of Paris, Notre Dame.

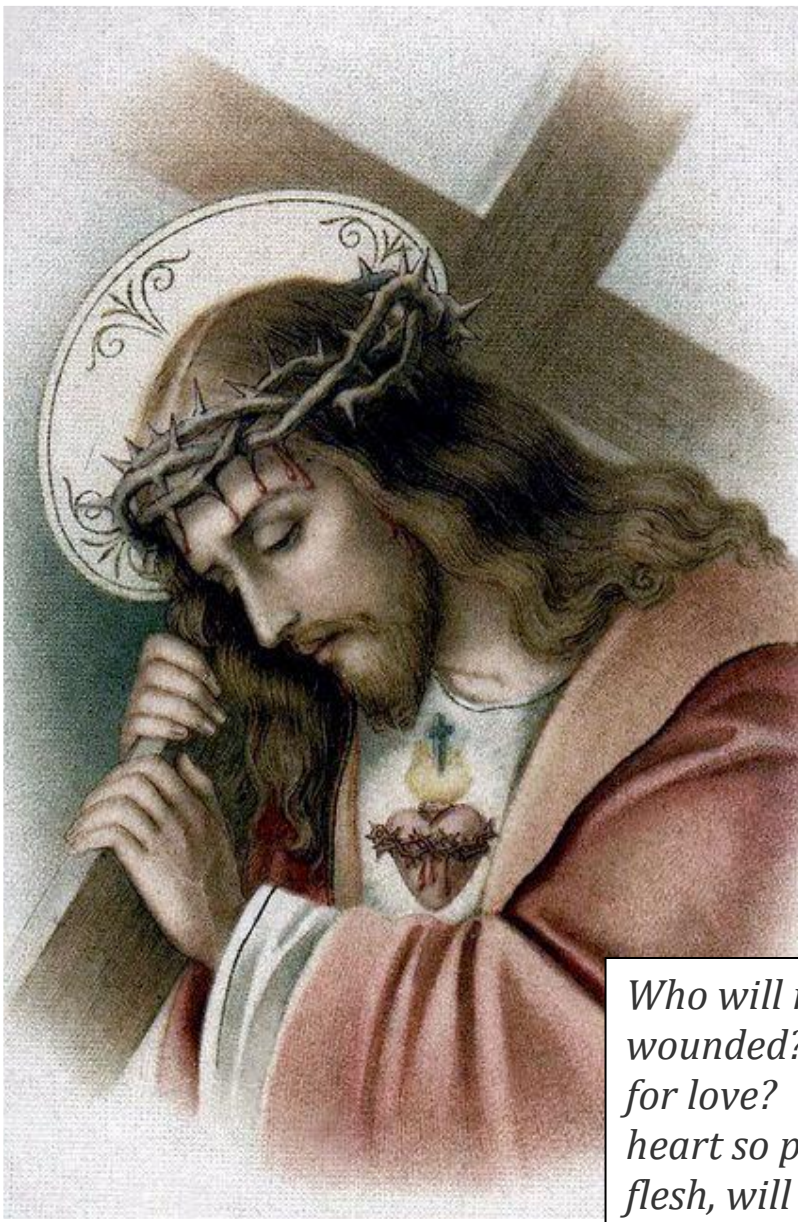
It was the custom also, in many churches, to veil the crucifix and the statues of the saints as soon as Lent began. To excite the faithful to a livelier sense of penance, the veilings deprived them of the consolation that seeing these holy images always brings to the soul. This custom is retained in some places. It was less general than the more expressive one used in the Roman Church, which we will explain in our next volume—the veiling of the crucifix and statues only in Passiontide.

We learn from the ceremonials of the Middle Ages that, during Lent, and particularly on the Wednesdays and Fridays, frequent processions used to be made from one church to another. In monasteries, these processions were made barefooted in the cloister, and barefooted. [19] This custom was suggested by the practice of Rome (where there is a Station for every day of Lent) that, for many centuries, began by a procession to the stational church.

Lastly, the Church has always been in the habit of adding to her prayers during the season of Lent. Until recently, her discipline was that, on ferias in cathedral and collegiate churches that were not exempted by a custom to the contrary, the following additions were made to the canonical Hours: on Monday, the Office of the Dead; on Wednesday, the Gradual Psalms; and on Friday, the Penitential Psalms. In some churches, during the middle ages, the whole Psalter was added each week of Lent to the usual Office. [20]

END NOTES

1. In Ezechiel, cap. xxix.
2. Num. xiv. 33.
3. Gen. vii. 12.
4. Exechiel iv. 6.
5. Exod. xxiv. 18.
6. 3 Kings xix. 8.
7. Ps. Qui habitat in at adjutorio, in the Office of Compline.
8. Scuto circumdabit te veritas ejus. Office of None.
9. Et sub pennis ejus. Sext.
10. Ipse liberavit me de laqueo venantium. Tierce.
11. Angelis suis mandavit de te, ut custodiant te in omnibus viis tuis. Lauds and Vespers.
12. Labbe, Concil. tom i.
13. Labbe, Concil. tom. i
14. Contra Nicetam tom. iv.
15. Can. 52. Labbe, Concil. tom. vi.
16. Anastas. In Gregorio II.
17. See their explanation in the volume for Septuagesima.
18. Honorius of Autun. Gemma animae, lib. iii. cap. lxvi.
19. Martene. De antequis Eccles. ritibus, tom. iii. cap. xviii.
20. Ibid.



Who will not love this heart so wounded? Who will not return love for love? Who will not embrace a heart so pure? We, who are made of flesh, will repay love with love. We will embrace our wounded one, whose hands and feet ungodly men have nailed; we will cling to his side and to his heart. Let us pray that we be worthy of linking our heart with his love and of wounding it with a lance, for it is still hard and impenitent.

-Saint Bonaventure-



This e-book was produced by:

The Seraphim Company, Inc.

**8528 Kenosha Drive
Colorado Springs, CO 80908-5000**

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